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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings in a study of an e-mail discussion activity in an undergraduate methods course. Students were asked to contribute an e-mail message to the class discussion at least once every two weeks; they could write on any topic suggested by their field experiences or related class discussions and readings. Critical interpretative methods were used to examine levels of reflection in student e-mail discussions and the degree of support for critical reflection offered in the e-mail activity. Findings suggest that the e-mail activity promoted some reflection among the participants and that, as the discussion developed, joint interpretations of field experiences by the participants increased, but critical reflection was rare. In light of the findings, the following suggestions for increased structural supports for critical reflection are offered: (1) help students identify problems and issues that emerge from their field experiences; (2) clarify expectations for critical reflection; (3) take a more active role as facilitator in the e-mail discussions; (4) integrate the e-mail conversations with what goes on in face-to-face meetings; and (5) continually monitor and support the joint negotiation of meaning that goes on in the discussions. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/MES)

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Facilitating Critical Reflection About Field Experiences on E-Mail: Emancipatory Teaching in Cyberspace

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Abstract: This paper reports findings in a study of an e-mail discussion activity in an undergraduate methods course. Critical interpretative methods were used to examine levels of reflection in student e-mail discussions and the degree of support for critical reflection offered in the e-mail activity. Findings suggest that the e-mail activity promoted some reflection among the participants and that as the discussion developed, joint interpretations of field experiences by the participants increased; but critical reflection was rare. In light of the findings, suggestions for increased structural supports for critical reflection are offered.

There has been a move in recent years to use telecommunication networks and electronic mail in teacher education courses, especially in conjunction with field experiences (Blanton, Moorman, & Trathan, 1998; Hoover, 1994; Schlagal, Trathen & Blanton, 1996; Thomas, Clift & Sugimoto, 1996; Wizer & Beck, 1996; Yan, Anderson & Nelson, 1994). Although there have been considerable description and argument about how such electronic dialogue can enhance student teacher learning, there has been little systematic study of precisely how to structure the e-mail activity to achieve particular learning outcomes. And yet several studies have suggested that the design of the e-mail assignment may be critical (Harrington & Hathaway, 1994; Schlagal, Trathen & Blanton 1996; Thomas, Clift & Sugimoto,1996).

In this paper I report on a study of my use of electronic mail as an activity to foster critical reflection on field experiences for preservice teachers. My studies are grounded in critical pedagogy in teacher education (Harrington, Quinn-Leering & Hodson, 1996; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Liston & Zeichner, 1987; Scering, 1997; Smyth, 1992) and social constructivist theory (Blanton, Moorman & Trathen, 1998; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985). Critical pedagogy in teacher education focuses on the teacher's role as facilitator of questioning and analyzing taken-for-granted assumptions about the status quo from multiple perspectives that include social, political and ethical frameworks. Teachers are viewed as emancipators and agents of change in schools. To take on such roles, teachers need to look beyond their own personal and subjective ways of looking at educational situations to develop skills of critical analysis and moral decision-making. Social constructivists maintain that learning is negotiated within socio-cultural contexts. Through guided support and activities within a social context, learners are scaffolded from their present and more egocentric ways of knowing to more complex ways of understanding.

Context and Method of Study

I teach at a large private university where the majority of teacher education students are young white females who do much of their field work and student teaching in a large urban school district. For most, experiences in these urban schools are their first in a multicultural context. In the course where I conducted these studies, all 23 students were Caucasian; all but three were female; all but three were 22 years old or younger; and all but six had limited experience in multicultural contexts. The course, Teaching in the Middle School, is required for middle school teaching certification and is usually taken during the semester before student teaching. In addition to a class focus on adolescent development, middle school curriculum, and pedagogy, students do twenty hours of clinical work in a middle school where we also hold some class sessions. Located in the center of a large urban area, the school's student

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population is 75% African American, 15% Hispanic, 5% Asian and 5% Caucasian. Although teachers in the school vary considerably in teaching style, philosophy, and experience, for field placements I have attempted to identify teachers who enjoy teaching at the middle school level land and who enjoy engaging university students in conversation about practice.

Beginning in the third week of the spring semester of 1997, I asked students to contribute an e-mail message to the class discussion at least once every two weeks. They could write on any topic suggested by their field experiences or related class discussions and readings. The only requirements were that messages fill at least one screen and that messages reflect reading and hearing other students' messages. To study what happened in these e-mail discussions, I asked these questions: 1) To what extent are students thinking critically about their field experiences? 2) To what extent does the structure of the e-mail activity and my own pedagogy support critical inquiry on e-mail? Primary data sources were a transcript of all e-mail messages written by 23 students and me (189 pages of text) as well as written surveys about the e-mail activity completed by students at the end of the semester.

To analyze the nature of the analysis and reflection in the student e-mail messages as well as the level of support for critical reflection, I used critical interpretive methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for analysis. Hatton and Smith's (1995) levels of reflective writing were used to code the student e-mail messages. Hatton and Smith distinguish "descriptive" writing where students interpret "in light of personal worries and previous experience" (p.46) from "dialogic" writing where students step back from events, weighing competing claims and exploring alternative perspectives. Only then, they argue, can reflection move into a "critical" mode where ethical criteria, based on social, political and cultural considerations are used to call into question the status quo. Two graduate students coded all messages and then negotiated coding to 100% agreement. To analyze to what extent the structure of the e-mail activity and my own pedagogy on e-mail were supporting critical inquiry, I focused my analysis on an extended discussion that emerged during the semester about the significance of cultural differences between teachers and students. I also analyzed my own e-mail messages and the written surveys completed by students. I used social constructivist learning and critical teaching principles to develop criteria for critique of my own pedagogy on e-mail as well as the structure of the e-mail assignment. Is there evidence that the e-mail discussions and my pedagogy facilitate student analysis of assumptions or beliefs about emerging problems and situations? Does my pedagogy on e-mail push students to think beyond their subjective interpretations to consider multiple perspectives? Does the activity structure of the e-mail discussions and/or my pedagogy seem to be promoting or modeling use of broader socio-political and moral frameworks to critique the status quo?

Findings

Levels of Student Reflection about Field Work

Analysis of the student e-mail writing revealed that that students engaged in extended discussions on a variety of problems and situations that offered opportunity for critical discussion and reflection. They talked about: low teacher expectations, socioeconomic and cultural gaps between teachers and students, vandalism in classrooms, school suspension and expulsion policies, social promotion of students, the uneven quality of substitute teachers, student rudeness toward teachers, lack of student interest in the curriculum, and how issues of sexual identity might be handled in the curriculum. In addition, they shared stories and problems that arose in their first teaching experiences with young adolescents. Using Hatton & Smith's (1995) framework for different types of reflective writing, I found that early in the semester about half of the students were largely at a level of "descriptive" writing; they were simply telling stories of their field experiences along with a description of their personal feelings about the experience. One student was "sad" when a girl called another girl "an ugly rag." Another student wondered how she would deal with the math class she observed where half of the students were absent due to suspensions. Another student reported her shock over two students making calls on their cell phones in the middle of class.

As students read each other's messages, they began to jointly pose alternative interpretations for what they were seeing. One student described an eighth grade class where the students seem to have no interest in what is going on and concludes: "It is too early to tell whether or not it is the lack of classroom management or if it is the students." Another student contrasted that class to a situation in an eighth grade computer class where the students are very social: "I am not sure whether this is a sign of immaturity or simply a higher interest in and curiosity for the subject matter." In reply, another student working with eighth graders suggested that their behavior can be explained "because they rule the school and bring an attitude into the classroom." Still another student argued that it's hard to separate seventh and eighth grade behavior: "I think it just may be the luck of the draw."

During the first five weeks of the semester, only four students reached what Hatton and Smith would call "dialogic reflection." One student puzzled over a half-empty algebra class due to the fact that many of the students are tutoring in a nearby grade school. She weighed the pros and cons of their absence: they need to learn math, but tutoring " helps the students' self-esteem and confidence. They think they are making a difference." Another student told the story of coming to a computer lab where students were supposed to be typing up final drafts of a one page writing assignment that they had been working on for three days. He noticed that many students were just beginning their paper and pondered a number of possible explanations: poor classroom management, low student motivation, uninteresting curriculum. Later in the semester, however, about half of the students movedinto this "dialogic reflection." Their messages demonstrated "a stepping back from the events... a "mulling about, [a] discourse with self" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, pp. 48) about alternative explanations and analyses of situations.

Only on three occasions in the semester, however, did individual students approach a level of critical reflection where they were considering events or problems "located in and influenced by ... historical and socio-political contexts" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 49). For example, one student told a story about a student who was caught with drugs and expelled. The student was an honor student and this was a first offense. She questioned a school system that throws kids out when they make a mistake: "Isn't school the place where students should get a second chance? Schools are there to help kids learn from their mistakes and to help them to succeed." Another student agrees, making reference to the historically poor treatment of children by American institutions, and continues the conversation at a critical level: "Children definitely deserve second chances but many of the institutions for remediation don't provide a helpful support system for change.... What becomes of problem children? It really makes me wonder when the school system simply dismisses a 'problem' child rather than addresses the underlying issues behind the events leading to expulsion.... children need to be treated differently than hardened adult criminals.

Level of Support for Critical Reflection

The students' move to dialogic reflection in the e-mail discussion in the middle of the semester came after a series of dramatic stories : the student who asked for help in reading but who got into a gang fight and was expelled; the girl who bit part of a boy's thumb off after he bit her in the breast; the boy who was called a "wimp" by a classmate after he had gotten roughed up in the bathroom. Then one student raised the question of whether she was capable of effectively teaching children with backgrounds so different from her own and particularly whether she could effectively teach African American children. That e-mail message led to a two week debate on the subject of cultural competence in teaching. These excerpts are representative:

> *I agree that white teachers will never have the same experiences as their black students. The same goes for black teachers and their white students. Still, this issue is entirely irrelevant. Because I am white, does this mean that I can relate better to the experiences of all white students? No! For most of my life, I've lived in an affluent...suburb inhabited for the most part by white Jewish families. With this background, I don't see how my 'whiteness' would aid me in teaching poor white students in a Kentucky mining town*

or wealthy, spoiled white Hollywood students....

I know we come from different backgrounds but that does not mean that I cannot learn from them and they learn from me. I know that growing up in an all white community has made it hard for me sometimes to relate to the students in the city schools, but I know that with experience and hard work I can be a good white teacher to my Black, Korean, Chinese, Native American and Japanese students.

If a black teacher who was raised in an urban environment came into a central city school he/she would in some ways have an easier time adjusting to the environment there than I would. However, just because something is difficult does not mean it is impossible. I think that Mr. _____ (who is white) has great relationships with his students. On the other hand, there is a middle aged African American man...[who] just screams...at the students.

I realize I have a lot to learn about the environment that the children come from because their background is different from my own...However, I do not see the difference between this and trying to reach any classroom of white students. I will have to take the time to get to know each one as an individual. I believe that I can teach any child who wants to learn.

In this extended discussion students were jointly presenting multiple perspectives on the issue of cultural conflict and competence in the classroom. The discussion generated a variety of beliefs and assumptions about good teaching, culture, and student-teacher relationships. On e-mail students seemed less inhibited than in class to challenge each other's beliefs and assumptions. But the students were doing little to question or critique their own assumptions about these topics. They drew largely from their joint personal experiences to support previously held positions. Nowhere in this thread of the e-mail discussion did students draw from the variety of critical frameworks (e.g. Anyon, 1981; Delpit, 1995; Noddings, 1994) we read in class to suggest alternative ways of looking at issues or to consider issues within larger socio-political and ethical frameworks. Furthermore, in the final surveys about the e-mail discussions, only three mentioned "reflection" or the opportunity "to think more fully" as a benefit. More typically, students cited the opportunity to "hear what other students were doing in their classrooms," get advice, and realize that others were having similar experiences.

Looking at the transcript of my e-mail messages to the students, I can see that on e-mail I was less active as a critical teacher than I was in class. I did not model critical pedagogy. I did not pose critical questions which could have disrupted usual ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and the unjust ideologies and values perpetuated by schools and other societal institutions. Instead, my e-mail messages were typically about directions, assignment procedures, and reminders. Consequently, I missed opportunities to guide the student discussion to a critical level. For example, at one point two students reported on a lesson they had tried to teach on the importance of police officers. They expressed their shock that their class of predominantly African American students did not share their own value of the police. Despite my students' efforts to get their students to say something positive about the police, most refused; only the white student in the class was willing to write a positive comment and then she made sure that no one else could read her paper. Instead of remaining silent, I should have posed questions here to help students critique the incident beyond their personal frameworks: Why were student perceptions of the police so divided along racial lines? Why do some people feel alienated from the police? Would Ogbu's (1983) theory of "involuntary immigrant" or Delpit's (1995) discussion of "cultural conflict" help make sense of this situation?

Discussion

The transcript of the conversation and the student surveys suggest that the way that I structured the e-mail assignment with focus on field work experiences and freedom to select topics encouraged students to hear and voice diverse views on a variety of subjects. This exposure to multiple viewpoints and questions from

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peers seemed to move many students from descriptive reporting to a higher level of "dialogic" reflection. E-mail made it possible for students to take the time to reflect on hard questions, say what they wouldn't say in class, and consider multiple ways of coping in what one student called "an unpredictable world." This study suggests, however, that to move to a consistent level of critical reflection about their field experiences, more structural supports in the e-mail activity would be needed. First of all, both the object and goal of critical reflection must be much clearer to students. Secondly, students must have a much clearer understanding that critical reflection requires using multiple perspectives, including socio-political and moral frameworks to identify and question their own beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning, and problems in schools. Finally, students need more models of how to identify and question their assumptions and how to utilize socio-political and moral frameworks to do so.

In the future I can see that if I want to support critical reflection on e-mail, I will need to:

1) Help students identify problems and issues that emerge from their field experiences. Instead of keeping the discussions completely open-ended, I should pose critical questions for debate and ask students to utilize particular social, political, cultural and/or moral frameworks for analysis and support. For example, from the inevitable nightmare classroom management stories that often emerge in such discussions, students could be asked to evaluate their school's suspension policy from the vantage point of Noddings' (1994) ethical caring or Anyon's (1980) "hidden curriculum."
2) Clarify expectations for critical reflection. A rubric that defines precisely what students must do in their e-mail entries could be helpful.
3) Take a more active role as facilitator in the e-mail discussions. I need to model how my experience "can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material" (hooks, 1994, p. 21). At the same time, I need to model how class readings can inform critical interpretations of field experiences and pedagogy. This could be done on e-mail much in the way that Dillard (1996) writes journals with her students. She uses her journal entries as places where she can "re-introduce topics, dilemmas, and questions which arise in their collective journals" and "place them back into the classroom context for critical examination from students' multiple perspectives" (Dillard, 1996, p. 14).
4) Integrate the e-mail conversations with what goes on in our face-to-face meetings. One idea would be to consider the transcript of the ongoing e-mail conversation as a class text. Periodically my students or I could prepare summaries of the e-mail discussions that include selected excerpts from them. These summaries could become the basis for face-to-face class discussions.
5) Continually monitor and support the joint negotiation of meaning that goes on in these discussions. Many students need individual support on e-mail, especially students who are struggling with critical issues, students who assume leadership roles in the discussion, students who are ignored and students who are silent. I must take greater care to insure that all have equal and ample opportunity to participate and critically reflect on their experiences.

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